

# **LOUISIANA ECOLOGICAL SERVICES OFFICE**

## **FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC WORK PLAN**

**(FY 2015-2019)**

**Updated February 2017**



**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE**

**ECOLOGICAL SERVICES**

**LAFAYETTE, LOUISIANA**

## U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

### **Service Mission Statement**

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

### **Louisiana Field Office Vision**

To accomplish the Service's mission, we strive to achieve ecosystem sustainability through preservation, conservation, enhancement, and restoration of those habitats essential for the long-term viability of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources in Louisiana which we are entrusted to conserve and protect.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this strategic work plan is to outline the Lafayette, Louisiana Ecological Services Field Office's five-year plan consisting of goals, strategies, assessment, and needs in order to fulfill the Service's mission. Strategic habitat conservation is defined as the efficient conservation of fish, wildlife, and vegetative populations through habitat management, protection, restoration, or manipulation. It is a process of developing a conservation strategy, making efficient management decisions, and using research and monitoring to assess accomplishments to refine future conservation strategies (National Technical Assistance Team 2008).

The Louisiana Ecological Services Field Office's five-year strategic work plan details the strategies needed to achieve our goals. An annual review of each program's accomplishments will be completed under the direction of the Field Supervisor and Deputy Field Supervisor with each program coordinator. In that review, field office priority areas, partnership opportunities, program focus, and personnel development opportunities will be evaluated.

The Louisiana Ecological Services Field Office's overarching goals are to protect and restore ecosystems, habitats, and populations on declining habitats that support threatened, endangered, and at-risk species, concentrations of migratory birds, and interjurisdictional fisheries. The Louisiana Ecological Services Field Office emphasizes a landscape approach to enhancing or preserving habitat. We also incorporate Strategic Habitat Conservation to address and prioritize habitat issues through partnerships with other Federal and State agencies, conservation organizations, private landowners, and citizen stakeholders to achieve the greatest possible benefits to Federal trust fish and wildlife resources.

The Louisiana Ecological Services Field Office is organized into Conservation Planning Assistance, Coastal Ecosystem Restoration/Water Resource Development, Threatened and Endangered Species, Private Lands/ Partners for Fish and Wildlife, virtual Coastal program, and Geographic Information System/ Information Technology (GIS/IT)

programs. Some Louisiana Ecological Services Field Office biologists are co-located at the New Orleans District (NOD) U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge, and the U.S. Army Fort Polk facility. The Administration Team completes the office staffing organization.

Louisiana Ecological Services Field Office biologists protect and conserve trust fish and wildlife resources in each of Louisiana's eight ecoregions, five major plant communities and 64 parishes (counties). The Conservation Planning Assistance staff review a pre-development consultation workload of approximately 2,000 actions annually and a wetland regulatory permit work load of approximately 750 permit applications annually. Louisiana has one of the largest wetland mitigation banking programs in the nation consisting of over 94,000 acres of protection, in part as a result of the Louisiana Ecological Services Field Office's work. The Endangered Species program staff works to protect and preserve Louisiana's 27 threatened and endangered species through technical assistance, consultations, and pre-listing activities, and typically reviews over 3,000 proposed Endangered Species Act (ESA) actions (technical assistance and informal consultations) annually. This program also works on candidate species conservation and other section 10 activities. The Coastal Ecosystem Restoration/Water Resource Development (CER/WRD) program staff is currently designing, implementing and maintaining 30 Service-sponsored Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) restoration projects. CER/WRD staff coordinates with partners to plan, evaluate, and implement restoration projects through CWPPRA and the Louisiana Coastal Area Study (LCA); both congressionally authorized restoration programs to reduce Louisiana's coastal land loss problem. CER/WRD biologists also coordinate with the USACE to reduce the impacts of large navigation and flood control projects on the natural environment. The Gulf Coast Restoration Program intended purpose is to address Gulf Coast restoration, either through direct funding or through monies from the BP/Macondo oil spill. This program will also perform environmental compliance/section 7 reviews of all proposed Gulf Coast restoration projects. The Coastal Program staff work to develop small scale coastal restoration projects, with an emphasis on projects that help conserve listed, candidate and at-risk species. The Private Lands/ Partners for Fish and Wildlife program staff coordinate with landowners to restore habitat for many of Louisiana's listed, candidate, and at-risk species.

## **LOUISIANA ECOLOGICAL SERVICES STRATEGIC WORK PLAN**

This section of the document outlines the work priorities and associated work activities for the Louisiana Ecological Services Office. The goal is to be more strategic with where we focus our limited program resources so that workforce planning targets are aligned with the current priorities of the Fish and Wildlife Service Directorate, the Department, and our Regional Office. The four "priority areas," with their long-term "desired future conditions," are not expected to vary significantly in the coming years. These are 1) At-risk species conservation, 2) Recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species, 3) Strategic partnerships, and 4) Legal obligations and other Administration mandates. These work priority areas will remain in effect until further notice.

With an emphasis on both species specific and landscape scale outcomes, this work plan is intended to assist and guide all Louisiana Ecological Services Office programs and

employees with the difficult task of determining which activities we will not be doing in this challenging time of budget cuts and hiring restrictions. We will re-evaluate our involvement in, and commitment to, any program activities that do not directly support these priority areas. Questions to consider when evaluating our involvement include:

1. To which of our desired future conditions or conservation outcomes is this work essential?
2. What is the risk to achieving our desired future conditions or conservation outcomes if we don't act — high, medium, or low?
3. What is the likelihood of severe legal consequences of not acting or delaying action?
4. What is the return on investment to our desired future conditions or conservation outcomes — high, medium, or low?
5. Are there others within the Service or outside the agency who are doing/could be doing this work?
6. Based on the answers 1–5 above, is this work a high, medium, or low priority?

### **PRIORITY AREA #1 AT-RISK SPECIES CONSERVATION**

#### **Generic Activities (applicable to all years):**

**Desired Future Condition:** Landscape level cooperative management, monitoring, and research of targeted species and selected habitats by the Service with the states and other partners that delivers effective conservation and minimizes threats such that listing under the ESA is precluded.

Specifically, the Louisiana Ecological Services Office will focus on those species for which we have lead responsibility and secondarily on those species that occur in Louisiana.

For the purposes of this Plan and associated activities, “at-risk species” are defined as those species that have either been proposed for listing, are candidates for listing, have been petitioned for listing, are Joint Venture’s species of conservation concern, any list Southeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) develops, or are imperiled, rare, or vulnerable as deemed by Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

#### **Work Plan Activities:**

##### **Over-Archiving:**

- Provide pro-active transparency with states and the public on all legal issues and Service decisions related to at-risk species.

- Incorporate appropriate conservation measures for at-risk species into all Program planning and on-the-ground activities.

**Intra-Service:**

- Emphasize communication with Regional Office At-Risk Species Coordinator.
- Concentrate on priority coastal restoration projects that provide significant at-risk trust resource benefits.
- Continue to maintain and update listed species information for use by staff in their work assignments.
- Enhance communication and collaboration with the Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture and appropriate LCCs to deter potential future ESA listing of high priority Joint Venture species.

**With Other Federal Agencies:**

- Actively engage with Department of Defense and Fort Polk to develop and/or modify Integrated Natural Resources Management Plans to more effectively conserve at-risk species.
- Work with federal agencies to further conservation of at-risk migratory bird species via Presidential Executive Order 13186 and NEPA.
- Partner with CWPPRA Program Federal agencies to consider habitat protection and restoration for at-risk species.
- Encourage agency consideration of at-risk species during all ESA section 7 consultations.

**With States:**

- Work with Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority to ensure at-risk species are considered in restoration planning.
- Continue close coordination with Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries via regular communication and meetings.
- Participate in or assist with field surveys with Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries staff, where appropriate.
- Partner with the State to implement those portions of the 2012 State Coastal Master Plan and assist in the development of the 2017 Plan, to aid at-risk species.
- Consider and incorporate conservation measures for Louisiana S1, S2, and S3 species into all program activities when possible.

**With Other Partners:**

- Provide outreach to educate the public on the importance of conserving imperiled species and their habitats.
- Work with NGOs to further conservation of at-risk species.
- Coordinate coastal restoration of at-risk species efforts with local governments, landowners, and NGOs.
- Pursue Partners for Fish and Wildlife projects to benefit at-risk species.

**PRIORITY AREA #2  
RECOVERY OF FEDERALLY LISTED THREATENED**

## AND ENDANGERED SPECIES

### **Generic Activities (applicable to all years):**

**Desired Future Condition:** Landscape level cooperative management, research, and monitoring of listed species and their habitats by the Service, in coordination with the states and other partners, that delivers effective conservation which prevents the extinction of and leads to the recovery (i.e., down-listing and de-listing) of listed species.

Specifically, the Louisiana Ecological Services Office will focus on those species for which we have lead responsibility and secondarily on those species that occur in Louisiana.

### **Work Plan Activities:**

#### **Intra-Service:**

- Utilize incentives, resource programs, etc. that help landowners manage habitat for critically endangered species or species close to recovery.
- Fully use Service websites and engage with External Affairs to design and deliver consistent messaging.
- Continue to maintain and update listed species information for use by staff in their work assignments.
- Continue to maintain, update, and improve pre-development screening on Louisiana Ecological Services Office website.

#### **With Other Federal Agencies:**

- Actively engage with other Federal agencies encouraging them to use the full scope of their authorities:
  - Department of Defense installations: actively participate in Integrated Natural Resources Management Plans development and review process ensuring they conserve and lead to recovery of listed species.
  - USACE: participate with USACE districts and explore development of MOUs through section 7(a)(1) to protect listed species.
  - U.S. Forest Service: participate in their Forest Management Plan development and review and implementation process.
  - Federal Highways: Work with the State Department of Transportation and Development on Conservation Strategies through 7(a)(1) to protect listed species and promote recovery.
  - Implement coastal restoration projects with Federal agencies to benefit threatened and endangered species.
  - Natural Resources Conservation Service through program conservation practices.
  - Complete Standard Local Operating Procedures for Endangered Species for both the New Orleans and Vicksburg USACE Districts.

#### **With State Agencies:**

- Coordinate with Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries on those things (consultation, research, recovery) related to listed species, i.e., LA pearlshell mussel survey guidance.
- Continue to partner and provide support/resources (when possible) to Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries on substantial efforts to recover the whooping crane.
- Continue to coordinate with Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries in their development of section 6 projects to benefit listed and at-risk species.
- Continue to partner and provide support/resources (when possible) to States on substantial efforts to recover listed species, i.e., LA pearlshell mussel survey guidance.

**With Other Partners:**

- Pursue Partners for Fish and Wildlife projects to benefit threatened and endangered species.
- Work with partners to implement coastal restoration projects that benefit threatened and endangered species.
- Coordinate with private landowners – especially timber companies – to enhance habitat for the benefit of listed species.

**PRIORITY AREA #3  
STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS**

**Generic Activities (applicable to all years):**

**Desired Future Condition:** Develop and maintain strategic partnerships within the Service, with federal and state wildlife agencies, and with other stakeholders to conserve federally-listed species, at-risk species, and other vulnerable trust resources established as high priority by the Service. Strategic partnerships support the latest understanding and principles of Strategic Habitat Conservation (including surrogate species as appropriate).

**Work Plan Activities:**

**Intra-Service:**

- Proactively work with external and internal partners and programs for the development and implementation of monitoring programs to assess the biological outcomes of conservation delivery efforts. These programs may include other office recovery leads or biologists, Refuge Inventory and Monitoring program staff, Water Resource Inventory Areas, monitoring for Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, CWPPRA Program, and Coastal Programs, among others.
- Support the Service's Gulf Restoration virtual office with Louisiana Ecological Services Office employees.
- Support Deepwater Horizon oil spill early restoration activities.
- Work with Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture and the Gulf Coast Joint Venture to help conserve their top priority species.

- Demonstrate leadership by establishing and maintaining meaningful partnerships with Landscape Conservation Cooperatives, advocating for Service needs and priorities, and contributing resources in support of the partnerships.

**With Other Federal Agencies:**

- Strategically focus the Service's technical assistance efforts to the Natural Resources Conservation Service on those portions of the Farm Bill that will provide the greatest conservation benefits to target species.
- Work with the USACE to implement programmatic landscape conservation efforts under the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act through Water Resources Development Act and the wetland regulatory program.
- Support RESTORE Act activities.
- Promote partnership with other Federal agencies to provide benefits to significant trust resources.
- Investigate further implementation of Presidential Executive Order 13186. (responsibilities of Federal agencies to protect migratory birds)

**With State Agencies:**

- Continue to demonstrate leadership by maintaining relationships and pursuing further progress with state fish and wildlife agencies to achieve common conservation goals.

**With Other Partners:**

- Demonstrate leadership by improving/restoring relationships and coordination with Tribes, NGOs, and local government officials.
- Work with NGOs to further conservation and monitoring of endangered and at-risk species.

**PRIORITY AREA #4  
LEGAL OBLIGATIONS AND OTHER  
ADMINISTRATION MANDATES**

**Generic Activities (applicable to all years):**

**Desired Future Condition:** Continue to find the most efficient ways to meet our legal obligations and other Administration mandates.

Legal Obligations and Administration mandates are not intended to cover/address “all things in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, Migratory Bird Treaty Act, etc.” In other words, this is not a catch-all category where we justify doing everything we have always done that does not meet our other priorities listed above.

Rather, this section is intended to address actual legal obligations — things we are obligated to do in statute or via litigation (e.g., settlement agreements, ESA section 7 consultations, section 10 permits, Candidate Notice of Review, listing actions, Freedom



of Information Act) and activities mandated by higher level executive leadership within the Administration – Department of the Interior or the Service Directorate (e.g., Department of the Interior Renewable Energy, Youth/Diversity Initiatives, Congressional Inquiries, and other Department of the Interior and Service Directorate priority activities).

### **Work Plan Activities:**

- Implement the regional Listing streamline plan to ensure consistent and predictable processing of rule products (especially ones with judicial deadlines).
- Adhere to project plans for all listing and critical habitat rules. All rules should be submitted to the Regional Office in accordance to schedules outlined in project plans (typically 4.5 months prior to *Federal Register* publication date given no extenuating circumstances).
- Complete all required recovery rulemakings in accordance with designated deadlines.
- Develop and implement an office work plan to deal with the increasing number of FOIAs we receive.
- Continue to support, participate, and be proactive in events that connect children with nature.
- Continue to report and track program accomplishments incorporating data management systems (e.g., TAILS, HabITS, TESS, PRS, ROAR, etc.).
- Complete annual Candidate Notice of Reviews and all other year-end reporting requirements.

### **FY-Specific Milestones**

#### **Late FY 2014**

- Assume responsibilities for 12-month findings and/or listing for Calcasieu crayfish and Kisatchie painted crayfish. **COMPLETED.**
- Work with Department of Defense and explore land acquisition/easements and management for Louisiana pine snake. **COMPLETED.**
- Increase coordination with timber companies and NGOs to develop Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances and enhance Louisiana pine snake conservation strategies. **COMPLETED.**
- Continue to work with partners toward implementation of the last needed actions, as identified in the 5-year review, to recover the Louisiana black bear. **COMPLETED.**
- Continue close coordination with Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries on recovering the Louisiana black bear to the point that ESA protection is no longer needed. **COMPLETED.**

- Continue to assist other Service regions with listing and critical habitat actions that they are responsible for, but which affect our Region (e.g., American eel 12-month finding, northern long-eared bat and red knot listing / critical habitat). COMPLETED.

#### FY 2015 and FY2016

- Pursue all opportunities to secure land essential to Louisiana pine snake conservation via agreements. On-Going
- Pursue all opportunities to secure access to land essential to the Louisiana pearlshell mussel conservation via the USFWS Partners Program in cooperation with other federal, state, and private partners and their available programs. On-Going
- Develop and implement conservation strategies and actions for Louisiana pine snake. Completed
- Increase coordination with Landscape Conservation Cooperatives to enhance location and preferable soil data layers. Completed
- Complete a Louisiana pine snake range-wide conservation strategy. On-Going
- Create a complete categorization of multi-district litigation and petitioned species, weighed against State-listed species of concern. Completed
- Begin construction with partners on one Louisiana coastal restoration project benefitting at-risk species and/or other Service trust resources. Completed
- Invite Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries participation on Louisiana pine snake range-wide conservation strategy. Completed

#### 2017 –

- Expand our outreach program and better educate the public of the Services goals and objectives for the State of Louisiana in partnership with LDWF.
- Pursue a plant conservation agreement with LDWF and aid in the preparation of a legislative packet to allow for more potential plant conservation projects in Louisiana before the end of the calendar year.
- Complete the LA pearlshell mussel 5 year review while continuing to work with partners towards implementation of recovery actions.
- Create opportunities to develop a new start that protects and or enhances habitats essential to the Louisiana pearlshell mussel conservation or the Louisiana Pine

Snake via the USFWS Partners Program in cooperation with other federal, state, and private partners and their available programs.

- Coordinate with LDWF, timber companies, and private landowners in securing Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances for the Louisiana pine snake.
- Pursue efforts with hatcheries and LDWF to identify additional at risk species which would benefit from further study and or propagation and release to aid in increasing population's to assist in avoiding any potential future need for listing actions.
- Complete revisions to the PDC screening website.
- Complete LA oil and gas fracking guidance and post the document on appropriate website for public access with links to the PDC website.
- Increase engagement with Gulf Coast Prairie and Gulf Coast Plains and Ozarks LLC's.
- Develop a spill and NRDAR response protocol.
- Complete state wide distribution sampling in salt marshes for Louisiana eyed silk moth and extend sampling to Galveston Bay Texas.
- Ensure that our PFW, coastal, and mitigation banking programs assist in the consultation and recovery of at risk species whenever feasible.
- Add the Northern Long Eared Bat to SLOPES, followed by selected mussels and plants.

This office will revisit this Plan annually and utilize adaptive management to provide details based on FY17 progress and projected needs for each successive year

2018 –  
2019 –

END.